

Colorado's first all-girls public school coming to Denver

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Following a growing nationwide trend toward single-gender classroom education, the first all-girls public school in Colorado will open next year in Denver.

In 2002, only 11 U.S. public schools offered single-gender classrooms. Today, at least 547 public schools offer single-sex classes, according to the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education. At least 91 of those schools are single-gender schools.

The surge comes three years after a federal rule said single-sex classrooms weren't discriminatory and as emerging research suggested that girls' and boys' brains develop differently.

Girls Athletic Leadership School, or GALS, was approved at a Denver board meeting this month. The charter school will open with sixth- and seventh-graders and grow to include eighth through 12th grades.

"We know that girls focus on academics more when they're in an all-girls setting, simply put, because we are taking away a large social distraction, especially in middle school," said Elizabeth Wolfson, founder of the school, which will be in south-central Denver.

"Research shows girls begin to trail off when they hit middle school," she said. "That is because of social distractions between girls and boys but also between girls and girls. By separating them out, we can work on the girl-to-girl piece."

The academic program at GALS is to be based on the Expeditionary Learning model, which emphasizes active learning, character growth and teamwork. A large part of the day will focus on health and wellness. Students will start in the morning with exercise, have opportunities for movement throughout the school day and must participate in extracurricular activities.

"We are going to keep the kids active to stimulate their brains," Wolfson said.

The idea already sold Bridget Ambler, mother of 12-year-old Autumn Seeber — who is blazing trails as the only girl on her Wheat Ridge youth baseball team.

"Sitting in a classroom all day can be difficult, especially for kids like my daughter, who need to get up and stretch and walk and fidget," said Ambler, who also is excited about the chance for her daughter to learn in a single-sex setting.

She has volunteered in her daughter's classroom and has seen her child fail to assert herself when boys are around.

"Studies have shown that girls in middle school will immediately back down in math and science when a boy raises his hand," she said. "I've seen it firsthand. In my mind, I go, 'Honey, you know this answer. You are smart. You can do it.' "

Why age but not gender?

Co-ed settings tend to reinforce gender stereotypes — ceding math and science to boys, and reading and writing to girls, said Leonard Sax, founder of the Pennsylvania-based National Association for Single-Sex Public Education.

His foundation says there is good evidence that single-sex classrooms can break down gender stereotypes. Girls are more likely to take classes in math, science and information technology; and boys are more likely to pursue art, music, drama and foreign languages.

Sax understands that single-gender classrooms may not be for everyone, but he believes people should have a choice. He also questions why schools segregate classrooms based on age but not gender.

"The brain of the 7-year-old girl is at a very different evolution of development than a 7-year-old boy, yet they are in the same classroom," he said. "There has never been studies that say age segregation is a good thing. Yet we do it out of inertia."

Findings are mixed as to whether single-sex classes make any difference in learning, according to a 2005 U.S. Department of Education report that surveyed existing research.

A 2008 report by the American Association of University Women said both girls and boys are faring better in school now than they were 30 years ago, with gender gaps that are relatively small and closing.

In Denver, gaps range from 5 to 11 points between boys and girls in fourth-, eighth- and 10th-grade scores on reading and writing on the 2009 Colorado Student Assessment Program. But boys outperformed or had similar results to girls in math and science.

In 2008, 54.3 percent of Denver girls graduated, compared with 43.3 percent of boys.

A 2009 UCLA study of college freshmen found female graduates of single-sex high schools had higher levels of academic engagement, SAT scores, and confidence in mathematical ability and computer skills than their female peers from co-ed schools.

The study, by Linda Sax, who is not related to Leonard Sax, also found all-girls grads showed higher levels of political engagement, greater interest in engineering careers and more confidence in public speaking.

"I would never suggest single-sex schools are for everybody," said Susanne Beck, director of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools. "They do play a very important role in terms of variety of the education model. But they have been predominately parochial and private. There is something wrong with that."

In 2006, the Bush administration made it easier for public schools to expand the number of single-sex classes by changing the rules of Title IX, the 1972 law that bars sex discrimination in public schools. The law had limited single-gender instruction to physical-education and sex-education classes.

Some organizations continue to argue against single-sex classrooms, saying separation is not representative of the real world and can be discriminatory.

The National Coalition for Women & Children in Education has asked the Obama administration to rescind the 2006 rule, saying the education policy shouldn't be built on "gender stereotypes."

"A real choice"

The ACLU opposes sex segregation in public schools "because it is unconstitutional, because it perpetuates antiquated gender stereotypes and because it deprives both girls and boys of the benefits of co-education," according to the organization's website.

Those were criticisms faced by Ann Tisch when she founded the New York-based Young Women's Leadership Foundation, which for 13 years has been opening public schools that offer single-gender college-prep education to inner-city girls.

"This offers parents and girls a real choice that is available to affluent and parochial-school girls but not girls in the inner city," she said. "We have found girls learn better in a cooperative rather than competitive environment."

Axl Academy, an Aurora charter school, separates genders in classrooms and the anecdotal evidence shows the division has made a difference, said Audra Philippon, head of the school.

Boys and girls in her school are separated while in class but commingle at lunch and recess.

"Neither boys nor girls feel like they are on stage and being watched by the other," Philippon said. "We see boys being really nurturing, kind and creative, and really patient. We see girls being loud and athletic and being proud of their skills. It's creating a space for them to try."

Girls Inc., a Denver nonprofit that offers an after-school setting for girls ages 6 to 18, draws 50 to 100 girls a day with programs that focus on health and sexuality, careers and self-defense.

Carol Bowar, president and chief executive of Girls Inc., is helping Wolfson develop GALS. "We are a huge advocate for same-sex programming," she said. "It creates an authentic space you can't get in a co-ed setting.

"Girls experience life in a different way than boys — different social, cultural and cognitive development. They are being bombarded with messages of how they should be," she said, adding that she hopes GALS becomes a refuge.

"The idea is to take girls to a place where they can deconstruct what it is like to be a girl," Bowar said.

The next move, she said, is to create a similar program for boys.

Staff writer Burt Hubbard contributed to this report.